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MARI HATAVARA

## Contested History, Denied Past. The Narrator's Failure in Ralf Nordgren's *Det har aldrig hänt* (1977)

*Det har aldrig hänt* – it never happened – is the title of Ralf Nordgren's historical novel from 1977 (= *DH*). This title raises several questions such as *what* did not happen, *who* says it never happened, and *why* raise the issue at all if it really never happened. These questions connect to such narrative issues as denarration or the disnarrated, counterfactuality, reliability and tellability, to mention but a few. I will not go through these concepts in detail but will in this paper study the ways a historical novel can relate to these issues, and especially to denarration. Nordgren's novel does use ontological denarration, that is, the narrator denies events that had until then been part of the story-world. This is, however, done in a way distinctive of the genre of the historical novel. Historical novels have a peculiar kind of story-world with connections to our real world.

The very title of the novel indicates that it belongs to the genre or subgenre of historical metafiction. The term was coined by Linda Hutcheon who, among others, regards the postmodern version of the historical novel as concentrating on the epistemological problems involved in representing the past, and on the constructed nature of reality and history (1988, 92–95). Ansgar Nünning defines the genre in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* as follows: “historiographic metafiction deals not so much with historical events, personages, and facts as with the reconstruction of the past from the point of view of the present.” (Nünning 2005, 216)

Nünning's statement, in much the same way as Nordgren's title, operates through negation: the statement emphasizes what historical

metafiction does *not* – at least *not so much* – deal with. This is symptomatic of the more recent definitions of the historical novel. The need to mention these historical events, personages and facts when discussing a genre that allegedly is not concerned with them, illustrates a long tradition in the theory of the genre. Even if the historical novel has very few characteristics theorists would agree upon, most theories of the historical novel concur on the statement that the genre is referential in nature. For example, Richard Maxwell states in *Encyclopedia of the novel* that the historical novel is “by definition referential, gesturing toward a world commonly understood to have existed” (Maxwell 1998, 545).

In the latter definition of the historical novel the story and its referentiality distinguish the historical novel from other types of novel whereas, quite to the contrary, the statement on historical metafiction emphasizes the discursive formation of the genre. In these definitions it is either form or content, story or discourse that dominates. To me it seems that both definitions are equally right and wrong: they emphasize one side of the genre but overlook the other. I am not going to elaborate in detail how – according to my mind – also the “traditional” historical novel is at least somewhat self-conscious and highlights its own textuality.<sup>1</sup> What I do want to illustrate is how historiographic metafiction does apply and highlight referentiality even when concentrating on the constructed nature of history. This argumentation can be demonstrated – quite surprisingly, perhaps – by pushing the definition of historiographic metafiction to the extreme, not solely constructing but also deconstructing the past. The technique of denarration may in a historical novel such as *Det har aldrig hänt* be used to deconstruct history by denying the past and thus contesting history. The rhetorical effect, however, rather highlights than undermines the historical events contested.

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1 Surely no-one would claim that the connections with the past a historical novel has through textual elements such as documents and historiography are incidental and without effect on the discursive formation of the text.

Centrality of denial and deconstruction instead of construction of the past – and in extreme form even without any construction – is possible because of a feature shared by all historical fiction: it has the former representations of the past as its subtexts. For this reason, a knowledgeable reader can understand the story-world, even if the narrative is based on negation. As Maxwell puts it, historical novels gesture toward a world “commonly understood to have existed” (1998, 545). This only requires that the narrative has a few references to one or another known place, date or person, which evoke the past through the reader’s previous knowledge.

### The narrator’s efforts to unravel the past

*Det har aldrig hänt* begins with a description of two men who ride along the frozen sea in the Åland Islands of Finland. During the first three pages the narrator discloses that the men are a Finnish farm-hand and a Russian soldier, and that the latter has a red armband. From these clues it is obvious that the story is set during the Finnish Civil War in 1918. The war was fought in Finland shortly after independence from late January to mid-May 1918, between two forces: the forces of socialists and the worker’s movement, commonly called the “Reds”, and the forces of the non-socialist, conservative-led Senate, commonly called the “Whites”. The colors used in armbands indicated the group to which individuals belonged. The Reds were supported by the Russian Federation, while the Whites received military assistance from the German Empire. Based on this very general historical knowledge, the reader, at least a native one, recognizes the historical events among which the story of *Det har aldrig hänt* is located. The reader knows that the men described belong to the losing side, with 27000 casualties – out of which only about 5000 died in battle while the rest were executed, killed in prison camps, disappeared, etc. For this reason the future of the men described does not look very promising to the reader. What happens to the men is the

issue the narrator in the novel sets out to find out. The narrator is set in the time of writing the novel and is explicitly present in the narrative posing as the author: going through archives, interviewing people and trying to construct a story.

The narrator takes the reader into the middle of the events at the beginning. The novel starts with the following lines:

Där är de!

Över isen rider de. Hovarna kastar i jämn rytm snö i luften. Spåret drar mot nordväst. (DH, 5.)

(There they are!

Over the ice they ride. Hooves whirl up snow at an even pace. The tracks lead northwest. (All translations mine.))

Here the story-world is disclosed like a scene where the two men are visible as they journey through the ice. Later on in the story these two men are executed by the whites. But before the reader learns about that, the narrative is taken over by the narrator-as-author and his efforts to find out what happens to the men. It soon becomes evident that the narrator is the only one who really wants to unravel the past. His preconception seems to be that the men faced their death in the Åland Islands. This assumption does fit the historical period. The narrator's problem is that characters in both past and present time try to deny this preconception.

The narrator attempts to approach the past events in roughly three ways: by going through written documents, interviewing the remaining eye witnesses, and using his imagination and special narrative techniques. The first two are retrospective in relation to the story world, and so is the last one, partially. Then again it also approaches and at times converges on the time of the story.

The documents the narrator finds in an archive do not take him very far. He comes across, for example, a telegraph sent by one of the few Reds in the Åland Islands. In it Akusti Penttilä is asking for information and orders from the Social Democrats and complaining that the whites rule everything in the islands. The narrator tries to interpret the telegraph in the following manner:

Ditt telegram från Mariehamn står kvar. Det säger så mycket som är svårt att fullt begripa. Men du visste vad du sa, du inbillade dig ingenting. Jag har tänkt, när jag stigit i land i Mariehamn bland andra som kommit med de stora färjorna för sommarens skull, att jag skulle gå in på Telegrafan och sända dina ord en gång till över isarna – nej, över det fria vattnet vi har! Skall jag adressera det till socialdemokraterna? Men vad tjänar det till. De saknar väl inte humor. Men så mycket annat. De är vår sorg. Så är det med den saken. (DH, 33.)

(Your telegraph from Mariehamn remains. Much of what it says is difficult to fully understand. But you knew what you were saying, you did not have illusions. As I got off the ferry in Mariehamn with other passengers who were there for their holidays, I thought I should go to the telegraph and send your words again over the ice – no, on the second thought, over the free water we have! Should I address it to the social democrats? But what's the use of it. Humor they do not lack. But so many other things. They are our trouble. That's how it is.)

The extract illustrates the difficulty of interpreting a historical document. As the narrator openly admits, a document without context and interpretation does not provide sufficient information to understand the past events. What makes the narrator's temporal position and his distance from the past evident is his idea of using the document anew, sending it to the contemporary Social Democratic Party. A kind of historical continuum is thus built by referring to both the past and the contemporary Social Democratic Party. However, this change of addressee does not work: the narrator does not expect the document to be taken seriously anymore, it has become but a joke. This indicates the gap between past and present.

Besides the narrator, also the eye-witnesses are faced with the difficulty of reaching the past. They claim not to be able to remember the past events but also deny the alternatives offered by the narrator. The reason for this is their subjective, partial understanding of the world now as well as then. This becomes obvious, for example, when one of the witnesses denies the execution of the two Reds altogether. The narrator explains, with an ironic tone, that this is due to his family engagement: his brother was among the Whites involved (DH, 11). Similar explanations occur at other places in the text, as well. The novel makes it very clear that everyone has their reasons to hold a certain kind of view of the past. The narrator's irony when telling

about the denying brother indicates his disappointment with the witness who only remembers what is convenient to him.

The narrator's retrospective approaches to the past, the use of documents or witnesses, do not succeed. As a third strategy the narrator tries to find out the past through the minds of the characters in the past story-world. After all, the narrator was able to offer the reader a scene of the past right at the beginning of the novel. He does, occasionally, also have telepathic powers to intrude on the characters' minds. But these abilities do not provide the answers, either. The characters in the past are just as unwilling to see the world around them as the people in the time of writing are to remember it. The characters repeatedly both think and say to each other: "vi ska vänta och se", ("we should wait and see"). In one occasion Varg-Sluk, a prominent shipowner, is listening to his son conversing with some white soldiers.

Bara han inte lånar dem pengar! tänker Varg-Sluk. Eller borde vi? Nej, inte ännu. Vi ska vänta och se, så ser vi sedan. (DH, 32.)

(As long as he doesn't loan them money! Varg-Sluk thinks. Or should we? No, not yet. We'll wait and see, then we'll see.)

Varg-Sluk is uncertain of the outcome of the war and thus cannot decide whether to help the Whites or not. In the midst of things he cannot decide his position because he is painfully aware of the consequences of a wrong choice. This "wait and see" attitude is recurrent in the novel. The characters plead ignorance of what is happening, and expect only the future to determine the nature and significance of the events.

In order to get the answers the narrator also uses a straightforward method: he tries to metaleptically address the characters, like in the following lines.

Och du då, Akusti Penttilä? Vad företar du dig efter att den 22 februari släppts fri. [...] Men Akusti Penttilä kommer tillbaka till Mariehamn. Går han till sin verkstad? Jag vet inte. Han är försvunnen efter den dagen. (DH, 32.)

(What about you, then, Akusti Penttilä? What are you up to after your release February 22<sup>nd</sup>. [...] But Akusti Penttilä goes back to Mariehamn. Does he go to his workshop? I don't know. He has disappeared after that day.)

In this extract, and in other places of narrator's metalepsis in the novel, the character does not answer the narrator. The only thing the narrator knows about the action of this character is his return to Mariehamn. About anything else, the narrator is again faced with silence and denial, and has to admit his own ignorance: "jag vet inte" ("I don't know").

In terms of knowing about the past and constructing a coherent view – or story – of what has happened, both the retrospective and contemporary perspectives fail. The alleged ignorance of the characters and the narrator deconstructs respectively both experience and recollection of the past in *Det har aldrig hänt*. The resulting interpretative implications can be compared with the ones evoked by counterfactual history which speculates on unrealizable events and outcomes in history. This speculation creates alternate histories, that is, narratives that provide contesting storylines about the past. According to my argument, however, the interpretative indications in the case found in the Nordgren's novel are quite different. The novel challenges past events without providing substitutive events or outcomes. Whereas alternative history emphasizes a new possibility and its consequences, denied history only accentuates the meaning and significance of the events denied.

## What is the reader to do?

The narrator fails to access these past events but this failure is communicative in nature in regard to the novel as a whole. Through the narrator's failing efforts the denied or overlooked events and possibilities in the past become highlighted, and the reader is encouraged to choose between contesting histories – even to build a historical narrative by herself. In this process the reader can employ both what is provided by the novel and also what she knows based on the novel's subtexts. Referentiality through subtextuality enables this kind of reader engagement in constructing the story-world even if the characters and the narrator deny the events.



The narrator's failure in *Det har aldrig hänt* serves the purpose of forcing the reader to make her own judgments about the events narrated and about the ways of this narration. By using narrative techniques like metalepsis self-consciously, and having the narrator posing as an author openly to plead ignorance, the novel deconstructs previous representations of the same events. Through this deconstructive function of the narrative, however, the past is highlighted in all its complexity and the reader is led to speculate on what really happened.

I argue that using several narratorial techniques in the effort to depict the past allows for representing the past in its diversity, determined as much by the possibilities of each moment in the past as by our present aim of understanding it. This openness of each moment is further emphasized in *Det har aldrig hänt* by the alleged ignorance of the characters living in the past story-world. The narrator's failure to reach the past retrospectively is paired with the characters' bewilderment in the past they do experience. Thus the emphasis is at least as much on the characters who construct the present in the story-world as it is on the narrator who reconstructs the past in the discourse.

Narrative logic often organizes events into a causal chain, determined either by their origin or their outcome. Gary Saul Morson uses the terms foreshadowing and backshadowing to designate this kind of history which can be used to bolster one particular version of the past (1994, 6–14). On the contrary, sideshadowing, as defined by Morson, allows one to see alternatives: what could have happened in addition to what did happen. In *Det har aldrig hänt* the bewilderment of the characters creates a special kind of openness and hypotheticality. The events of the story become the target of not only the narrator's but also the characters' interpretive effort.

What is peculiar of the characters in *Det har aldrig hänt* is their "wait and see" attitude. They refuse really to try to understand the present because they put such a strong emphasis on the future. In Morson's terms, they would really like to be able to foreshadow the present, to see the inevitable in what is to be. This urge for foreshadowing and its utter failure indicate the futility of the effort.

The significance of the future in the minds of the characters is demonstrated in the following quotation. Before the war reaches the

Åland Islands, one of the inhabitants, called Blade, tries to make everybody openly to declare their side in order for them to be able to go beyond that simple dichotomy, and interact as persons. Blade has made both red and white armbands, the symbols of the parties of the war, and he tries to make people choose one or other. Nobody will make a choice and take an armband, but a blind beggar says he might.

– Jag skulle väl kunna ta en bindel jag. Men då jag är blind, så vet jag inte vilken jag ska välja, om det är min sak att ta. Tänk om jag får orätt bindel sen. Och det blir de andra som vinner. Hur går det då med mig. (DH, 23.)

(– I could take an armband, I suppose. But I'm blind. I don't know which one to choose, if I have to take one. What if I get a wrong one. And it'll be the other ones who win. Then what's going to happen to me.)

The blind beggar's problem, not knowing how to be on the winning side, seems to be shared by all the people in the village depicted. This urge to be on the winning side – whatever it is – prevents the people from making any decisions. At the obvious lack of knowledge of what is to happen, but determined to be on the winning side, the people can do nothing – they are blinded by their cautiousness. They have no control on what happens to them as individuals or as a community. The generations to come, on their part, are deeply affected by what they would rather like to believe instead of trying to find out what really happened. They, it could be said, use backshadowing in a way that is very selective of the past events – and are thus blinded by their conservatism.

The message of the novel seems to be that real openness to possibilities and alternatives requires taking a stand. The novel, albeit being aware of the problems involved in knowing or understanding the past, stresses the importance of trying to find out. Despite the problems and his failures the narrator does not give up but continues the effort to unravel the past events. In the end he does tell the story of what happened to the two men in detail. The story-world, which at the beginning of the novel is assumed existent, then contested and denied, is at the end brought to a conclusion. This can be interpreted as the narrator's way of taking his stand, making up his own mind, despite the lack of

information, despite the risk of being wrong. Whereas the characters fall for an extreme need to foreshadow, and the witnesses use selective backshadowing, the narrator recognizes both these possibilities and their inherent problems. Additionally, the narrator faces the inevitable openness of each moment, the necessity of sideshadowing. The narrator's answer is to make and promote an enlightened evaluation of both past and present. On the basis of an enlightened evaluation understanding and action becomes feasible – and the narrator is able to conclude the story.

The story in the past ends with a description of how things are getting back to normal. In the quotation below one of the characters is baking bread with her daughter as they witness the priest, who also was engaged in the execution, leave the village:

- Får se, vem som ska komma efter honom, säger flickan.
- Någon blir det väl, svarar Erika-mor. Och hennes hander återvänder till bakkbordet och brödet.
- Kring hennes mun bor en sträng tystnad.
- Så är det. (DH, 171.)
- (– I wonder who'll replace him, says the girl.
- Someone will probably come, replies mother Erika. And her hands get back to the baking table and to the bread.
- Her mouth has a character of tight silence.
- That's how it is.)

Here we have again a character who refuses to talk: her silence is described as tight. The last sentence is interesting because it allows two possible interpretations as to who says it. Is it a thought of Erika or a thought of the narrator? On the one hand, Erika could be interpreted to decide in her mind to keep her mouth shut about the events, and also to refuse to speculate on what is to come. Hence, she continues the tradition of silence.

On the other hand, the last sentence can be taken as the narrator's discourse. In this case, it could indicate either a pessimistic or an optimistic view: In the pessimistic sense, the narrator accepts his failure, and leaves the characters and the story-world be. In an optimistic interpretation the narrator is satisfied with himself as he has managed to narrate the events into a kind of closure.

The last possibility, the narrator's complacency, is supported by what follows in the text. Even if the story of the past events ends with the last extract, the narrative returns to the time of narrating and continues for five more pages by describing the time of writing the novel. The narrator has heard that a priest wants to make a memorial plate to commemorate the two men executed in the Åland Islands. The narrator ends the novel by stating that the story will continue the day when the plate is mounted on the wall, and it will then continue growing.

The ending points toward the future. It assures the continuation of the story as long as the past is acknowledged. This stresses the importance of all the temporal levels: past, present and future, in understanding the world. The novel *Det har aldrig hänt* can itself be regarded as commemorating those forgotten in the past. It certainly encourages readers to take the past into consideration, to try to find out what exactly happened – even, and perhaps especially in the case of events denied and historical accounts contested. The challenge for the reader is not to be or remain blind about the events of past and present, but to take a stand and to observe and evaluate the world from there. An active approach to finding out about the past seems to be the way to understanding the present, as well.

In regard to historical novels the multiple narrative levels also function as temporal levels. From the very beginning, the theory of the historical novel has emphasized the link between the past depicted and the time of the writing of the novel: in order to gain significance for the present, the past needs to be seen as a pre-history to it (see Lukács 1955, 58–59). On the other hand, the characters experience the past as their present. Depending on the narrator's position she occupies either a retrospective view of the past or perceives the past through or with the characters as it unfolds. This double-perspective on time opens up several temporal positions for the reader's interpretation. Through them historical novels are able to bridge the gap between characters experiencing the historical story-world and readers reflecting that as history.

The efforts of both the narrator and characters in *Det har aldrig hänt* to understand the past highlight the fact that the past is deter-

mined as much by anticipating the possibilities of each moment as by the retrospective interpretive efforts. This openness and indeterminacy in both experience and interpretation is most evident when the characters plead ignorance of their present moment. This indicates a radical fuzziness in all the temporal levels: past, future and present.

Fuzzy temporality, or polychrony, is a phenomenon David Herman has paid attention to (2002, 214–220). In polychronic narrative the temporal ordering of the events is undetermined and, consequently, the narrative's ability to make sense of the world by ordering it into a coherent chain of events becomes questionable. Herman analyses a story by Anna Seghers, "Der Ausflug der toten Mädchen", where the temporal centers interact: a frame-like story and the story situated in the past told inside the first story (1998, 81). These two temporalities intermingle, and issues such as knowing and remembering become crucial. The reader is faced with the challenge to produce a temporal and causal continuum. According to Herman, the story by Seghers is about a past that is still going on and evolving (1998, 87).

The narrative structure of "Der Ausflug der toten Mädchen" comes close to that of *Det har aldrig hänt*. The past consists of the narrator's efforts to gain knowledge and make sense of past events. As the novel represents both the narrator's difficulties in finding out about the past and the characters' difficulties in understanding the surrounding events, it demonstrates the uncertainty and relativity of each temporal perspective. Hence, reflexivity is a dominant feature in both the story and discourse. The moment of telling and the moment of experiencing approach each other, and so the reader is reminded of their relation to her own world. Moreover, the end of the novel clearly indicates that the story continues in the present and future.

The relativity of time is present in Nordgren's novel also because of uncertainty of the relationship between the two story-worlds. The told past world and the world where and when the telling takes place are parallel in nature, instead of the past world being nested in the world where the telling takes place. Both these worlds have a relation to the actual world. This again makes the narrator posing as the author in some sense homodiegetic in relation to both worlds. When the narrator at the end of the novel anticipates the story to

keep growing, this creates a continuum to the present which is also the reader's. The past really is going on and evolving and the reader is encouraged to take part in it.

### Mimetic past?

To conclude, I would like to return to the question I opened this paper with: does the historical novel – or historiographic metafiction – deal with the past in a referential manner, or is it (solely) concerned with the ways the past is understood today? This question can be reformulated and approached from another angle: some critics today find historical fiction to be problematic because it is neither history nor fiction proper. This issue has, among others, been discussed lately by Ann Rigney and Harry E. Shaw. Their views on the subject differ greatly. To put it in a simple way, Shaw (2004, 174–175) claims that there is a problem with historical fiction, and the problem is that historical narrative can never be complete. Shaw emphasizes the role of serious realist fiction in representing history and he calls for historical fiction that reaches for the historical reality which, according to Shaw, is out there.

Rigney's (2004, 362–364) approach is quite the opposite. She focuses on how historical fiction can play a significant role in the formation of cultural memory. Rigney recognizes that all historical writing, including academic historiography, depends on selection, foregrounding and marginalization of some or the other elements of the past. She suggests that we need to construct a “poetics” of memorability, that is, to find out the ways in which literary form may be constitutive of memory and thus of historical understanding. Where Shaw yearns for what he calls “the representation of an objective historical structure and process” (Shaw 2004, 179), Rigney suggests that “‘artificial’ – even patently false – memories crafted by writers may prove more tenacious in practice than those based on facts which have not been submitted to the same creative reworking” (Rigney 2004, 391).

My approach is much closer to Rigney's than to Shaw's: I believe specific fictional modes and means can have significance in understanding and communicating the past. These modes and means need not – or perhaps even should not – be serious or in the realistic tradition in order to make sense of history. It has been widely recognized that particularly extreme events and experiences may be best approached with aesthetic practices leaning towards the non-representational. This discussion has been reviewed and furthered lately by Greg Forter (2007). *Det har aldrig hänt* may be partly regarded as trauma fiction, but I believe the phenomenon of the synthetic highlighting instead of undermining mimetic construction applies to many other types of narratives, as well.

This goes against the grain of our common way of thinking about narrative communication. As exemplified by Nünning's view on historiographic metafiction earlier in my paper, the emphasis on the "how" is assumed to diminish the illusion of "what". But I do not believe narrative communication really is such a zero-sum game between the synthetic and the mimetic. At least this is not the case in historical fiction. In *Det har aldrig hänt* at least two issues prove my case. Firstly, even if the narrator addressing the narratee does often interrupt telling the events of the story in order to speculate on the possibility of telling them at all, this is mimetically motivated – a historian needs to be critical toward her sources. Secondly, the reader is invited to take an interpretive position on a higher diegetic level where she understands the thematic meaning of the narrator's difficulties, and so she is further encouraged to apply this understanding intertextually and contextually to her own world and her own understanding of the past.

Historiographic metafiction encourages reader engagement in imagining and evaluating the past, and also in comparing competing historical accounts and representations. In this sense all historical fiction is metafiction: the genre is self-reflexive and requires to be understood as textual construction. In my view, however, this does not decisively rid the genre of its referentiality to the past through and against other textual constructions of the past.

Lars-Åke Skalin (2005) has discussed the fact-fiction issue from a formal point of view. His important observation is that ontological

and epistemological matters should not dominate the discussion on whether fiction can state something about real matters. Skalin requires a triangular model of communication for factual discourse: besides sender and receiver, the things talked about must exist (2005, 63, 71–72). In fiction, nothing is referred to but rather an illusion of experience is created – and this, in the sense Skalin understands fiction’s mimetic functioning, excludes the possibility of a teller affirming anything (2005, 73, 78). Fiction can only relate to the actual world through thematization and analogy (Skalin 2005, 63). In historical fiction, I want to argue, this is not the case. I am not suggesting that an author of a historical novel should be held accountable for what is said in her work. What I want to offer is the possibility of the reader taking the communicative game of historical fiction as part of the intertextual construction of history. In the reader’s interpretation, the triangular communication may be created between herself, the novel and all the other (textual) knowledge of the past events put across in the novel. Any connection with the actual world does not solely depend on the mimetic illusion of the story-world and possible analogical interpretations, but also on the reader seeing herself as (partly) homodiegetic with the story-world. For whereas the author “nothing affirms”, narrative communication with references to previously known events offers the reader the possibility to re-evaluate these events on her own, along with further representations of them.



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